

Mormons and the Olympics

Constructing an Olympic Identity

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Since the early twentieth century, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, otherwise called the LDS or Mormon church, has attempted to integrate itself more fully into American culture while maintaining its traditional morality and exclusive beliefs. During the 1980s and 1990s, the LDS church constructed an Olympic identity by highlighting the achievements of Mormon Olympic athletes, touting them as examples of religious piety who enjoyed athletic success because of their adherence to specifically Mormon doctrines, particularly Mormon dietary laws. Paradoxically, the LDS church simultaneously sought to demonstrate mainstream religious attitudes and to downplay its differences with other American religions by associating itself with the patriotism and national pride related to hosting the Olympic Games. The LDS church capitalized on its associations with the bidding for and planning of the 2002 Olympic Winter Games to foster and cultivate an appealing and reputable public image.



Since the early twentieth century, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, commonly called the LDS or Mormon church, has attempted to integrate itself more fully into American culture while maintaining its traditional morality and exclusive beliefs. During the 1980s and 1990s, the LDS church created an Olympic identity which capitalized on its Olympic associations both to emphasize its unique culture, teachings, and doctrines, as well as to claim status as a mainstream American religion. During this time, Mormons constructed an Olympic identity by highlighting the achievements of contemporaneous Mormon athletes and by revisiting the accomplishments of past Mormon Olympians. The LDS relationship with the Olympic Games culminated in the 1990s with the church's strong support for Salt Lake City's bids for the 1998 and 2002 Olympic Winter Games. An examination of the roles of three Mormon Olympic athletes, the way the Mormon church portrayed them, and the LDS church's role and objectives in Salt Lake City's bids to host the Olympic Winter Games reveals a great deal about how Mormon culture during the 1980s and 1990s used the Olympic Games to define itself both to the world and within the Mormon community.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the LDS church began to highlight the achievements of Mormon Olympians, both contemporary and past, and to associate their accomplishments with the Mormon church. By emphasizing these ath-

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letes' Mormon affiliation, the LDS church was able to stress for its own members the faith's doctrinal uniqueness from other religions. In a movement directed mainly at the church's adolescent members, LDS leaders consistently cited the achievements of Mormon Olympians as evidence of God's blessings to faithful church members. Mormon Olympians represented examples of morality and piety, and their athletic achievements indicated their generally wholesome lifestyles. One important component of this wholesome Mormon lifestyle was strict observance of the dietary restrictions that prohibit the use of alcohol, tobacco, coffee, and tea, and encourage members to eat grains and avoid too much meat. Mormons refer to this doctrine of health as the *Word of Wisdom*, and LDS leaders have often equated the achievements of Mormon Olympic athletes with obedience to this doctrine.¹ The story of Alma Richards, Utah's first Olympian, effectively demonstrates the LDS emphasis on Mormon Olympians as outstanding examples of faith and piety.²

The small southern Utah town of Parowan provided both Utah and the LDS church with their first Olympian. In 1912, Alma Richards journeyed to Stockholm and won gold in the high jump, clearing six feet, four inches and setting a new Olympic record. The nascent Olympic Games had yet to achieve the international status and acclaim which they enjoy today, and Richards' achievement was largely overshadowed by the feats of Jim Thorpe. Indeed, the *New York Times* did not even report the result of the high jump competition, nor did it mention Richards as an Olympic victor. Although Salt Lake City's *Deseret News* did give brief mention of Richards' accomplishment, and in Provo, where the twenty-two year old Richards was attending Brigham Young High School, a large crowd turned out to welcome the track star home, Richards' Olympic victory went relatively unnoticed in Utah and the United States.³ Over seventy years later, however, the story of Alma Richards assumed a greater importance among LDS audiences.

Richards' Olympic achievement gained prominence among LDS audiences during the 1980s and 1990s with the corresponding growth in popularity and prestige of the Olympic Games. Mormons revived Richards and his story, and placed a strong emphasis on his faith and piety. In 1992 Mormon sportswriters and *Deseret News* journalists Lee Benson and Doug Robinson published *Trials and Triumphs: Mormons in the Olympic Games*.⁴ In this book, Benson and Robinson chronicled the stories and experiences of several Mormon athletes who competed in the Olympic Games. The book was specifically written for an LDS audience, and its account of the Alma Richards story demonstrated this emphasis.⁵

Benson, who wrote the chapter on Richards, relates how Richards, while preparing for his final jump during the 1912 Olympics, removed his cap (which he had been wearing to shield an infected eye from the sun) "and in full view of the 22,000 spectators, knelt down, bowed his head, and prayed."⁶ Richards,

full of renewed strength and confidence, cleared the height and eventually won the event. A 1996 *Deseret News* article by Twila Van Leer shamelessly borrowed from Benson's account and reported that Richards "dropped to his knees and prayed" before the final jump.⁷ Richards' own words, however, described the incident in a slightly different way. Richards later wrote of the experience that, because of the pressure he felt, "as I walked back to make my jump, I said a prayer and asked God to give me strength, and if it was all right that I should win – that I would do my best to set a good example all the days of my life."⁸ Although the sources agree that Richards indeed prayed before he attempted that final jump, there is a degree of ambiguity in the wording. Richards' account implies that he prayed as he walked; Benson (and Van Leer, who was relying on Benson) specifically wrote that Richards knelt and prayed in full view of the spectators. This is an important distinction, regardless of which account is more accurate. In the 1990s, Benson, writing for an LDS audience, emphasized Richards' faith and piety by describing the prayer differently than Richards himself described it, thereby indicating a stronger emphasis on Richards as a moral example, as well as an athletic champion. Of course, Richards jumped to victory, and the story of the prayer implies that God aided his efforts.

Earlier LDS leaders also touted Richards' athletic achievements as evidence of God's grace to the worthy and pious. In the 1920s, LDS authorities consistently cited Richards' many track and field victories as a result of his strict observance of the *Word of Wisdom*.⁹ However, during the 1980s, the Olympic Games gained a great deal of international prominence and acclaim, notably stemming from the commercialization and widespread publicity that accompanied the 1984 Los Angeles Games. In conjunction with the Olympic Games' increased appeal and prestige, LDS faithful emphasized Richards' Olympic experience much more strongly than the 1920s LDS leaders, who were more impressed by Richards' achievements as a track star. Thus, with the growth in prominence of the Olympic Games, Richards' achievement gained greater significance several decades after it transpired. The 1912 Olympic champion, who hardly merited coverage in the Salt Lake City newspaper, gained far more recognition for his Olympic achievement in the 1990s. In the late 1990s, billboards throughout Utah featured Richards' picture in advertising and publicizing the upcoming Salt Lake City Olympics. Indeed, the 2002 torch run was deliberately routed through tiny Parowan in honor of Richards.¹⁰ In addition to reviving Richards, in 1984 Mormons found another Olympic hero who embodied their religious ideals, a young gymnast named Peter Vidmar.

The experience of Peter Vidmar, a Mormon gymnast, at the 1984 Olympic Games is another example of Mormonism's emphasis on its Olympic athletes and their depiction as pious and exemplary LDS church members. The 1984 Los Angeles Olympics propelled the Olympic Movement to a higher level of visibility than it had previously enjoyed; most Americans considered the 1984 Games a

smashing success.¹¹ The LDS church correspondingly trumpeted Peter Vidmar's Olympic achievements and strongly emphasized his Mormon affiliation.

In 1984 Vidmar and the United States men's gymnastics team won the first-ever American gold medal in the team event, edging China by a close margin. Vidmar tied for the gold medal in the pommel horse and won silver in the all-around, the first American to ever win a medal in the event.¹² Unlike Alma Richards, Vidmar did not hail from a small rural town. He lived in Los Angeles. By the summer of 1984, Vidmar had already cemented his status as a top American gymnast, winning the all-around title at the McDonald's American Cup in March of 1983 and 1984.¹³ Furthermore, earlier in the summer of 1984 Vidmar had placed first in the Olympic Trials.¹⁴ These accomplishments made Vidmar one of the United States' best hopes for an Olympic medal in men's gymnastics.

LDS church leaders recognized Vidmar's status as a strong Olympic contender and an upstanding member of the LDS church. In March of 1984, before the Olympic Trials, Richard Romney, an Associate Editor for the official LDS youth magazine *New Era*, wrote an article that lauded Vidmar's gymnastic successes and anticipated a strong showing in the 1984 Olympic Games. Romney went further than merely recounting Vidmar's gymnastic résumé. He informed the LDS youth that Vidmar was also a "normal fellow" who attended his church meetings, performed in social LDS congregational plays ("road shows"), did his homework, and read his scriptures. In addition to outlining Vidmar's busy schedule, Romney asserted that Vidmar's most exciting moment had not been a gymnastic event, but when he shared his religious beliefs with another gymnast and helped her join the LDS church.¹⁵

Romney's article is illuminating in several respects. It demonstrates how LDS leaders used accomplished LDS athletes to promote devout LDS behavior. By associating Vidmar's athletic achievements with his devotion to the LDS faith, Romney implied that the two were inherently related. Furthermore, although Vidmar had yet to compete in the Olympic Games (he had been a member of the 1980 Olympic Team which did not compete in Moscow), Romney's article began with an imagined scenario of Vidmar winning the all-around competition in the (upcoming) 1984 Olympics. The article portrayed Vidmar as a devout LDS believer whose upcoming Olympic success would surely be partly the result of his pious adherence to the LDS faith. The article clearly demonstrates the 1980s LDS synthesis of achievement, religious devotion, and the Olympic Games.¹⁶

Vidmar did not disappoint his admirers. His Olympic achievements brought instant national fame and, in the succeeding months, Vidmar performed gymnastic routines in several exhibition events throughout the nation.¹⁷ Despite his fame, the national press did not mention Vidmar's religious preference. Indeed, Vidmar chose not to emphasize to the press any role his faith might have played in his athletic success. The closest allusion to Vidmar's religiosity came from

his coach, Makoto Sakamoto. On the final day of the Olympic all-around competition, Sakamoto related that Vidmar had arrived at the gymnasium early to practice and had found Japan's Koji Gushiken, his chief opponent and eventual gold medalist, meditating and reciting a Japanese mantra in a Samurai ritual in preparation for the competition. Sakamoto commented that "Peter is very religious too. To see that kind of religious concentration, well, he knew it would be a tense night."¹⁸ Aside from this scant mention of religion, Vidmar's religious faith was not a public issue. Vidmar kept his faith private; he was reluctant to address his individual successes, focusing instead on the team's overall victory. Vidmar insisted that "the team gold medal meant more to him than any individual achievement."¹⁹ He attributed the 1984 victories to his team's desire and camaraderie.²⁰

Publicly at least, Vidmar did not emphasize the LDS church's role in his athletic success. However, to other LDS church members, Vidmar did not hesitate to assume the status of a role model, especially to LDS youth. Vidmar's achievements brought him a good deal of national recognition, a fact not lost on church leadership. In April 1985 Vidmar addressed the male LDS attendees at the church's semi-annual General Conference. Traditionally, prominent LDS leaders address the male body of the LDS church in these meetings in order to deliver prophetic wisdom, counsel, and admonitions. Vidmar, just twenty-three years old, held no notable church position, and was asked to speak solely on the merits of his Olympic achievement. Vidmar's talk, entitled "Pursuing Excellence," emphasized the desire and hard work which are requisite for success in athletics and in life. Vidmar also emphasized a strong LDS athletic theme by relating a story in which he, as the victor in a prestigious German tournament, received a silver cup full of wine. Although tradition called for Vidmar to take a drink, he refused in obedience to the LDS *Word of Wisdom*. Vidmar did not explicitly equate his athletic success with observance of LDS church principles, including the *Word of Wisdom*, yet LDS leaders implicitly associated him with these ideals as a role model of piety and faith by asking him to speak at the General Conference and by connecting his Olympic achievements with his religious fidelity to the tenets of the LDS faith.²¹

Like Alma Richards, Vidmar did not publicly ascribe his athletic success to his religious faith, yet LDS leaders and writers implicitly made the connection by emphasizing Vidmar's religious faith and piety. Indeed, Benson wrote in *Trials and Triumphs* of Vidmar's struggles to convince his coach that he could and would abstain from training on Sundays, since he could not "put the sport ahead of his priesthood and of Sunday."²² Again, Benson was writing to emphasize Vidmar's religious stature as much as his athletic prowess. Consistent with the movement to construct a Mormon Olympic identity, Benson's primary goal was to stress Vidmar's Mormonism, rather than to chronicle the historical events.²³

Benson and Robinson's book also narrates the story of Henry Marsh, another Mormon Olympian. However, Marsh's career developed much differently than those of Richards and Vidmar. Henry Marsh was a Mormon steeplechaser who competed in the 1976, 1984, and 1988 Olympics. He would have competed in 1980 had the US not boycotted the Moscow Games. He was an accomplished runner, ranking three times as the world's top steeplechaser (1981, 1982, 1985), and setting the US record four times.²⁴ Unfortunately for Marsh, bad luck seemed to plague his career, especially his Olympic efforts. Marsh finished tenth in the 1976 Olympics, missed 1980 due to the boycott, and placed fourth in 1984 while suffering from a virus. Marsh was disqualified at the 1981 World Cup for running around a jump, although he was pushed, and, in 1983, he was tied for the lead when he crashed into a barrier and fell, cracking several ribs. Marsh's sixth-place finish at the Seoul Olympics in 1988 signaled that his competitive running career was in decline. He retired soon after.²⁵

Although he never won an Olympic medal, Henry Marsh still enjoyed the status of a prominent Mormon athlete. Many secular journalists viewed Marsh's career as ill-fated or star-crossed, bemoaning the misfortunes that had beset his career. Leading up to the 1984 Olympics, the *Los Angeles Times* briefly noted the accidents, disqualification, and illness that Marsh had previously suffered,²⁶ and later attributed his loss to "bad luck again."²⁷ In contrast to this characterization of Marsh's career, a July 1984 article in the LDS publication *New Era* downplayed Marsh's mishaps and emphasized the runner's religious goals over his temporal ones.²⁸ Published four months after the similar article on Peter Vidmar but before the 1984 Olympics, *New Era* highlighted Marsh's religious devotion and explicitly connected his running success with his religious faith. The article stated that Marsh "unashamedly acknowledges the hand of the Lord in his success" and believed that his running accomplishments were part of God's plan for him.²⁹ The article also lauded Marsh's missionary efforts. In addition to serving a two-year mission to Brazil before his running career blossomed, as an elite athlete Marsh "serves as a great ambassador of the Church" since spectators and journalists recognized that he is a Mormon.³⁰

Faithful LDS church members, therefore, considered Marsh an outstanding role model, and many considered Marsh's religious piety to be an important force in his athletic endeavors. Unfortunately, Marsh's bad luck diminished his popular appeal. In a 1987 *USA Today* article, Marsh admitted to being bothered by the various mishaps that had sabotaged his Olympic efforts, but affirmed that he had given his best effort, and that sport was just one component of a well-balanced life.³¹ Unsurprisingly, after the 1984 Olympic Games, LDS church publications did not refer to Henry Marsh in connecting religious faithfulness with athletic success, despite his long and successful career.

The athletic careers of Peter Vidmar and Henry Marsh, and the revival of Alma Richards' Olympic achievement demonstrate the LDS church's construc-

tion of an Olympic identity through faithful adherents who competed in the Games. Mormons revived Richards as a devout believer who prayed for God's help – and received it. They characterized Vidmar as a faithful and dedicated athlete who worked hard enough to win Olympic gold, and they praised Marsh as an unofficial ambassador and representative of the LDS church. These three men were Olympians and Mormons in the 1980s and 1990s, the time period during which LDS leaders and writers effectively merged these two components into an LDS Olympic identity. This identity emphasized the role of religion in athletic success and demonstrated the benefits that could come to those who observed the *Word of Wisdom*, prayed for success, and observed the teachings and doctrines of Mormonism. This LDS Olympic identity was especially unique since it transcended the traditional national boundaries that Olympic competition generally establishes. In addition to representing their state or nation, Mormon Olympians represented the worldwide LDS community. The emphasis on their membership in the LDS church created a trans-national Olympic subculture, where Mormon rooted for Mormon, regardless of national affiliation.³²

The Mormon church holds an interesting position as both an American and international religion. Although over 50% of its membership is non-American, the church maintains its world headquarters in Salt Lake City and the church leadership is overwhelmingly American. Mormon culture, however, has managed to transcend national boundaries, especially with respect to the Olympic Games. During the 1990s, Mormon Olympians gained recognition and status among fellow Mormons, and the LDS church touted its Olympians as positive examples for all church members, regardless of national citizenship. For example, four articles in the December 1996 LDS magazine *Ensign* briefly highlighted the 1996 Olympic experiences of four Mormons, three of whom were American.³³ This magazine article, intended for the entire English-speaking LDS membership, emphasized both the athletic and spiritual endeavors of these four Olympians. Emily Porter LeSueur, a synchronized swimmer from Arizona, won Olympic gold in Atlanta. LeSueur commented that the rigors of training had helped her spiritual growth, and that she managed to maintain her spirituality while competing abroad through regular prayer and scripture study.³⁴ Samu-elu Atoa, a Samoan Mormon who managed his nation's 1996 Olympic team, claimed that his service in various church positions in Samoa prepared him for the job of leading his athletes.³⁵ The other brief articles described Bill Roy, a skeet shooter from Las Cruces, New Mexico, and Kristine Quance, a swimmer from Los Angeles.

By 2000, the trans-national Mormon Olympic identity was well established, since *Ensign Magazine* again featured Mormon Olympians in its November issue. This time the journal emphasized non-American Mormon Olympians.³⁶ Again, the *Ensign* article clearly connected these athletes' accomplishments with their LDS church membership. Rulon Gardner, the gold medal winner in Greco-

Roman wrestling, commented on the honor of carrying the American flag at the Olympic closing ceremonies and said, "I feel overwhelmed to have that honor of representing my country, and hope I'm also always representing the Church."³⁷ In addition to United States athletes, the *Ensign* article briefly mentioned Mormon Olympians from Ghana, Trinidad and Tobago, Great Britain, Australia, Lithuania, and Hong Kong. A similar article appeared in the May 2002 *Ensign*, highlighting Mormons from Ireland, Japan, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, and Germany who competed in the Salt Lake City Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games.³⁸ Through its member Olympians, the LDS church fostered a transnational sense of Mormon identity through the Olympic Games. This trend continued. In anticipation of the 2004 Olympics in Athens, the LDS-owned Salt Lake City newspaper *Deseret News* briefly covered four non-American Olympians who "may be of local interest due to their membership in the LDS Church."³⁹

The construction of LDS Olympic identity in the 1980s and 1990s emphasized the unique experience of being Mormon, and stressed the uniqueness of Mormon culture, doctrine, and teachings. This Mormon Olympic identity revived the Olympic experience of Alma Richards and accentuated the Mormon piety of Peter Vidmar and Henry Marsh to reinforce LDS ideals and teachings, especially the ideals of the *Word of Wisdom* and missionary service. Furthermore, as Mormonism spread throughout the world, Mormon Olympians transcended national boundaries as Mormons cheered and followed their religious comrades from various nations. This Olympic identity was exclusive in nature, highlighting and emphasizing the unique characteristics of Mormonism, accenting the transnational Mormon culture, and stressing the merits and rewards of obedience to Mormon teachings and beliefs. However, in addition to its exclusive nature, during the 1990s, Mormon Olympic identity also possessed a strongly inclusive impulse.

This inclusive impulse stemmed in part from the Mormon emphasis on proselytizing. The Mormon faith strongly stresses the importance of sharing its beliefs with the world, and many young Mormons serve eighteen-month to two-year stints as full-time missionaries. Since Mormonism places such a strong emphasis on proselytizing, Mormons feel the need to highlight the unique virtues of Mormonism as the path to salvation, yet manage to appeal to as many people as possible. Mormonism is forced to balance the paradoxical nature of inclusively appealing to the world's population in order to bolster its exclusive membership. The Olympic Games provided an effective tool for the LDS church to assert its inclusive nature.

In addition to seeking new converts, the LDS church has historically felt a desperate urge to be included among the mainstream religions of the United States. Mormon culture, especially in Utah where it predominates, is flush with foibles and eccentricities, from its staunchly conservative voting habits to its strict liquor laws and green Jello clichés. Ethan Yorgason explained the Mormon

desire for inclusion as “an inferiority complex vis-à-vis the rest of the United States” driven by “[f]eelings of embarrassment” over Mormonism’s unique cultural quirks.⁴⁰ Saddled with these feelings of inferiority, in the 1980s and 1990s Mormons attempted to resolve the paradox of maintaining their exclusive identity, while gaining more widespread acceptance through the Olympic Games. During the 1980s and 1990s, Salt Lake City’s drive to host the Olympic Winter Games presented an opportunity for the LDS church to address these two desires, as Larry Gerlach phrased them, “to convert and to be liked.”⁴¹ Salt Lake City hosting the Games would provide the LDS church with the chance to promote itself to the world as an appealing and honorable religion. LDS faithful viewed the Olympic Games as a possibility to exude a positive image to the world, both to cultivate possible converts as well as to foster the world’s good favor.

As Salt Lake City attempted to secure the Olympic Winter Games during the 1980s and 1990s, the LDS church capitalized on its association with Utah and Salt Lake City to demonstrate mainstream religious attitudes and to downplay its historical and doctrinal differences with other American religions. To this end, the Mormon church was instrumental in securing, preparing for, and staging the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. Although the Mormon church played an enormous role leading up to the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympic Winter Games, the church chose to pursue good public relations rather than outright conversions. Thus, the LDS church deliberately adopted a low profile and shied away from its normal proselytizing activities during the Games.⁴² In addition to the Games’ official host Salt Lake City, the LDS Church very much considered itself to be unofficially hosting the Olympic Games, and adopted a subtle approach to ensure positive publicity for the church during the Games.⁴³

In 1995, when the International Olympic Committee announced that Salt Lake City would host the 2002 Olympic Winter Games, concerns quickly surfaced concerning the role the LDS church would play during the Games. Pundits throughout the world immediately labeled the Games the “Mormon Olympics” or “Mo-lympics,” and anticipated that the LDS church would use the Games as a platform to proselytize to the world.⁴⁴ Although the LDS church had not *publicly* supported Salt Lake City’s bids for the 1992, 1998, and 2002 Olympic Winter Games, church-owned businesses contributed \$210,938 to Salt Lake City bid committees between 1985 and 1995.⁴⁵ In addition, the Salt Lake Bid Committee provided IOC members with a document entitled “Facts About Salt Lake City: Host City for 2002,” which provided a general background on Salt Lake City and Utah as a suitable site for the Olympic Winter Games. The list touted Utah’s advantages in location, geography, and infrastructure, and also included information about the LDS Church and Utah alcohol policies.⁴⁶ Clearly, from the beginning of the bid process, the LDS church and the Salt Lake City organizers enjoyed a cozy relationship, and the Bid Committee did little to separate Salt Lake City from its dominant church in official presentations to the IOC. The

LDS church recognized that Salt Lake City's hosting the Olympic Games could potentially create a public relations bonanza and allow the church to present itself to the world in a positive light.

As early as 1998, when the LDS church established the "Church Olympic Coordinating Committee," the LDS church planned to assist the Salt Lake Organizing Committee (SLOC) in mustering sufficient volunteers to stage the Games.⁴⁷ LDS volunteerism at the Olympic Games was not unprecedented; around twenty-five hundred LDS volunteers had volunteered at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics.⁴⁸ The foreign missionary program had prepared many LDS volunteers with foreign language skills, and their clean-cut image was especially appealing to the Los Angeles organizers.⁴⁹ Both the Salt Lake organizers and LDS leadership viewed the use of LDS volunteers as a windfall: the organizers would have access to skilled volunteers, and the LDS church would have its membership interacting prolifically with foreign visitors from throughout the world. By 1998 LDS leaders believed that positive Olympic experiences with LDS church members would improve the church's image throughout the world and perhaps bolster future proselytizing efforts. Thus, this component of Mormon Olympic identity was clearly inclusive, since the overall goal was positive public relations and an improved international reputation.⁵⁰

Later that same year, the Salt Lake Bid Committee bribery scandal triggered a sequence of events that led to a pronounced shift in the LDS church's involvement with the Olympic preparations. After the resignations of several prominent SLOC members in the scandal's wake, Robert Hales, an LDS apostle and the church's chief Olympic liaison, recommended hiring Mitt Romney to the Salt Lake Olympic Committee Board of Trustees. Romney, a Mormon bishop, despite not being a Utah resident, became CEO of the Salt Lake Olympic Committee on February 11, 1999, prompting a flurry of speculation about the LDS church's influence over SLOC.⁵¹ Romney's hiring and his subsequent appointment of a Mormon Chief Financial Officer prompted criticisms of "cronyism" and LDS bias, even from prominent LDS Utah citizens.⁵² Romney did little to quell the storm when he asked Merrill Bateman, an LDS General Authority and president of LDS-owned Brigham Young University in Provo, to close the school during the Olympic Games so that its students could volunteer at the Games.⁵³

The LDS church felt a strong sense of urgency to help the 2002 Olympic Winter Games come off successfully since its image was inextricably linked with Salt Lake City's. Salt Lake City was, after all, a 19th century Mormon settlement and is still the site of the LDS church's worldwide headquarters. Despite the fact that in 2002 over half of Salt Lake City's residents were not LDS, media portrayals before and during the Olympic Games unavoidably emphasized the city and church connection.⁵⁴ A poor Olympic showing would embarrass both Salt Lake City and the LDS church. Amid the turmoil of the bribery scandal and Romney's controversial hiring, both Salt Lake City and the LDS church wanted

nothing more than successful Olympic Games. However, in early 2001, the controversy surrounding the LDS church's involvement in planning and staging the 2002 Winter Games compelled the church to scale back its overt involvement and adopt a more subtle and subdued approach.⁵⁵

In anticipation of the 2002 Salt Lake Winter Olympics, the LDS church cooled its normally aggressive proselytizing activities in favor of a more subdued platform centered on cultivating a positive international reputation. As historian Larry Gerlach has noted, the presence of the international press offered the church an opportunity to “recast Mormonism as a mainstream Christian religion rather than an aberrant cult”⁵⁶ and allow Mormons to disabuse the world of any lingering misconceptions about their doctrines and beliefs. In February 2002, speaking of the Games, LDS church president Gordon Hinckley emphasized the church's policy of distancing itself from the official events by stating, “This is the Salt Lake Olympics, not the Mormon Olympics.” Hinckley also suspended Mormon proselytizing efforts on the streets of Salt Lake City for the duration of the Games.⁵⁷

Despite the official distance maintained by the LDS church from the Olympic festivities, the LDS church had no intention of standing idly by during Salt Lake City's Olympic carnival. The month before the Games began, *Ensign* magazine published an article entitled, “Being a Good Host to Visitors During Games.”⁵⁸ The article listed several ways in which the LDS church planned to help “host” the 2002 Olympics. It noted that the church had encouraged its members to volunteer for the organizing committee, donated the use of a large downtown plaza for the medal ceremonies, and scheduled several free public performances by the Mormon Tabernacle choir. Furthermore, during the Olympics, the church produced an enormous musical event called *Light of the World: A Celebration of Light* which emphasized Mormon heritage and values and was performed free of charge at its 21,000 seat Conference Center. Clearly, the Salt Lake City-based LDS church considered itself as a co-host of the Games, despite its official policy of non-involvement. The opportunity for international recognition and acceptance proved too appealing for the church to entirely divorce itself from the Salt Lake City Games. The *Ensign* article made no distinction between welcoming the world to the Olympic Games and welcoming the world to church sites in Salt Lake City. The church clearly sought to use the Olympic Games to impress upon the world the value of its doctrines, traditions, and morality. So concerned with its public image was the Mormon church that three months after the Olympics, in May 2002, *Ensign* published excerpts from newspapers around the globe which made positive comments about the LDS church in conjunction with Olympic coverage.⁵⁹

The LDS church viewed the Olympic Games as an important vehicle for self-promotion. From the 1980s, when the LDS church began to construct an Olympic identity, the LDS church indirectly aided various Salt Lake City bid-

ding committees until Salt Lake City ultimately secured the 2002 Olympic Games. Furthermore, the LDS church played a prominent role in planning and organizing the Games, although it reduced its overt involvement due to mounting criticism. Finally, the Mormon church considered itself to be co-hosting the Olympic Games, as demonstrated by its donation of facilities and personnel, and the staging of musical and artistic performances aimed at entertaining and educating tourists and Olympic pilgrims alike through Mormon-style presentation. The LDS Olympic identity was inclusive in that it sought to appeal to the widest possible international audience and to downplay the church's theological and cultural differences with other religions. The Olympic Games, especially the 2002 Salt Lake Winter Games, provided a powerful forum for the LDS church to enhance its international reputation, minimize its differences from, and stress its similarities to, other mainstream religions.

The LDS Olympic identity constructed in the 1980s and 1990s presented an interesting paradox of exclusive and inclusive ideology. Mormons used examples of their victorious Olympians to emphasize the merits of the Mormon lifestyle and to reaffirm the value of their faith as manifest in athletic achievement. In an approach that appealed directly to Mormons, this exclusive Olympic identity emphasized the unique nature of Mormonism by highlighting the advantages enjoyed by those who obeyed its tenets – such as the *Word of Wisdom* or Richards' Stockholm prayer – and formulated a transnational Olympic identity that focused on shared faith rather than shared citizenship. Paradoxically, the LDS Olympic identity of the 1980s and 1990s also focused on inclusiveness, as the LDS church attempted to capitalize on its associations with the bidding for and planning of the 2002 Olympic Winter Games to cultivate an appealing and reputable public image.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the modern Olympic Games gained a great deal of international prestige and status. As the Olympic Games grew in prominence, the Mormon church capitalized on its associations – real, imagined, or exaggerated – to the Olympic Games in order to both highlight its unique way of life and to emphasize its status as a 'normal,' mainstream American religion. The Mormon church's use of Mormon Olympians and the Olympic Games, both to reinforce its exclusivity and the uniqueness of its doctrines and to present itself as an inclusive mainstream American religion, is an interesting paradox that imitates many issues of modern Mormonism.⁶⁰ Perhaps the most important element of this dual identity is the fact that both components capitalized on the immense prestige, status, and appeal of the modern Olympic Games. Thus, the Olympic Games and Olympic athletes – and the inherent ideals they possess – represented powerful symbols for the Mormon church to use in asserting its spiritual uniqueness to its membership while accommodating all who might be interested.

Endnotes

- 1 LDS founder Joseph Smith wrote the revelation which Mormons call *The Word of Wisdom* on 27 February, 1833. It is published in the LDS scripture *The Doctrine and Covenants*, Section 89 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989), 175-176.
- 2 Lee Benson and Doug Robinson, *Trials and Triumphs: Mormons in the Olympic Games* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1992), 5.
- 3 Twila Van Leer, "Utah Native Leaped to Fame in 1912 Summer Games," *Deseret News*, 14 January 1996.
- 4 The *Deseret News* is a Salt Lake City-based newspaper indirectly owned by the LDS church. Many Utah residents consider its news coverage to favor its LDS readership.
- 5 There is a substantial amount of popular Mormon sports literature, although most of it deals with non-Olympian athletes. See William T. Black, *Mormon Athletes* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980) and *Mormon Athletes II* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982); Lee Benson, *And They Came to Pass* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988); LaVell Edwards and Lee Benson, *LaVell: Airing It Out* (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, 1995). In addition, *Why I Believe* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 2002), a collection of personal testimonies of faith by prominent Mormons includes entries written by Mormon sports figures Andy Reid, Steve Young, LaVell Edwards, and Danny Ainge.
- 6 Benson and Robinson, *Trials and Triumphs*, 5.
- 7 Twila Van Leer, "Utah Native Leaped to Fame in 1912 Summer Games," *Deseret News*, 14 January 1996.
- 8 Gib Twyman, "Route to Honor Utah Golden Boy?," *Deseret News*, 20 June 2001.
- 9 Richard Ian Kimball, *Sports in Zion: Mormon Recreation, 1890 - 1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 116. See esp. pp. 108-116 for discussion concerning LDS leaders using athletics to emphasize *Word of Wisdom* observance among adolescent church members.
- 10 Gib Twyman, "Route to Honor Utah Golden Boy?," *Deseret News*, 20 June 2001.
- 11 Robert Lindsey, "Success of Games in Los Angeles Likely to Change Future Olympics," *The New York Times*, 12 August 1984. John C. Spence (To the Editor), "My Hometown: Los Angeles Is the Place," *The New York Times*, 19 August 1984. Stanley Cohen, "A Spectacle Stirs the Jumble of Nationalism," *The New York Times*, 26 August 1984.
- 12 Richard Hoffer, "Gushiken Returns Rising Sun to Its Place in the Rafters," *Los Angeles Times*, 3 August 1984; "Li Ning and Chinese Team Attain the Blush of Success, Glint of Gold" *Los Angeles Times*, 5 August 1984. Vidmar tied for gold in the Pommel Horse with Li Ning of China.

- 13 "Vidmar and Miss Retton Win," *New York Times*, 19 March 1984.
- 14 Peter Alfano, "Vidmar Wins Gymnast Trials," *New York Times*, 4 June 1984.
- 15 Richard M. Romney, "With the Greatest of Ease," *New Era*, March 1983, 21.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 After the 1984 Olympics, Vidmar toured the United States in 1984 with the Southland Corporation, performing gymnastic routines with fellow medalists Tim Daggett, Scott Johnson, Mitch Gaylord, James Hartung, and Bart Conner. See George Vecsey, "For Vidmar, Life Goes On," *New York Times*, 21 October 1984. Three years later, Vidmar and Johnson performed for Congress in an office building on Capitol Hill in Washington DC as part of a United States Olympic Committee lobby for authorization to mint commemorative coins to honor US Olympians. See "Sports People: Gymnasts in Congress," *New York Times*, 5 August 1987. Vidmar has continued to capitalize on his Olympic success, pursuing a career as a motivational speaker for large corporations and charging \$10,000 for his one hour presentation. Vidmar even manages to incorporate his pommel horse routine into his speeches. See Lee Benson, "Vidmar Still Mining Olympic Vein 20 Years After Golden Moment," *Deseret Morning News*, 20 August 2004.
- 18 Richard Hoffer, "Gushiken Returns Rising Sun to Its Place in the Rafters," *Los Angeles Times*, 3 August 1984. Gushiken won the all-around that night by 25/1000ths of a point.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 George Vecsey, "For Vidmar, Life Goes On," *New York Times*, 21 October 1984.
- 21 All talks given in LDS General Conferences are printed the next month in the *LDS Ensign Magazine*. See Peter Vidmar, "Pursuing Excellence," *Ensign*, May 1985, 38-42.
- 22 Benson and Robinson, *Trials and Triumphs*, 125.
- 23 Benson and Robinson's book contains no citations, notes, or bibliography, and fails to mention that Vidmar *tied* for his gold medal in the pommel horse (Benson merely states that he won the event). This is not meant as an attack on Benson, but rather an observation on his intended audience and purpose.
- 24 Dick Patrick, "Marsh Still Searching For Olympic Moment," *USA Today*, 12 August 1987.
- 25 Benson and Robinson, *Trials and Triumphs*, 156 - 176.
- 26 Marlene Cimon, "Marsh Actually Likes Underdog Role," *Los Angeles Times*, 28 July 1984.
- 27 Marlene Cimon, "Bad Luck Again Trips Up Marsh; Korir Wins Gold," *Los Angeles Times*, 11 August 1984.
- 28 Melvin J. Leavitt, "Making News: Henry Marsh: World-Class Steeplechaser," *New Era*, July 1984, 30.

- 29 Ibid., 31.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Dick Patrick, "Marsh Still Searching For Olympic Moment," *USA Today*, 12 August 1987.
- 32 Benson and Robinson's book *Trials and Triumphs* includes a chapter on Karl Tilleman, a Canadian Olympian in basketball, and also includes an appendix of Olympians which lists Mormons from Mexico, Sweden, Tonga, Singapore, Canada, Australia, Finland, Fiji, and Yugoslavia. See also, Larry Gerlach, "'The Mormon Games': Religion, Media, Cultural Politics, and the Salt Lake Winter Olympics," *Olympika XI* (2002), 32. Endnote 168 notes that Benson and Robinson's list is incomplete and includes Mormons who converted after their Olympic experiences. For an interesting examination of Mormons as an ethnic group, see Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle With Assimilation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 62-66. For commentary on the creation of a Mormon culture, see Dean May, "A Demographic Portrait of the Mormons, 1830-1980," in *The New Mormon History*, ed. D. Michael Quinn (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 131.
- 33 "Newsmakers: Latter-day Saint Olympians," *Ensign*, December 1996, 54.
- 34 "Keeping Faith Afloat," *Ensign*, December 1996, 54. LeSueur's synchronized swimming technical routine was set to the music of 'When the Saints Go Marching In.'
- 35 "A Guide to the Games," *Ensign*, December 1996, 55.
- 36 "News of the Church: LDS Athletes Compete in Olympics," *Ensign*, November 2000, 112.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 "News of the Church: Thirteen Latter-day Saints Compete in 2002 Winter Olympic Games," *Ensign*, May 2002, 111.
- 39 Lee Benson, "Plenty of Reason to Cheer: The Utah Connection in Athens," *Deseret Morning News*, 12 August 2004.
- 40 Ethan R. Yorgason, *Transformation of the Mormon Culture Region* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 190.
- 41 Gerlach, "The Mormon Games," 32. Mark Dyreson commented that the "desperate pursuit of Olympic status" by Utah's Olympic pioneers was "an opportunity to prove that their 'peculiar kingdom' is not really peculiar at all, ("Olympic Games and Historical Imagination: Notes From the Faultline of Tradition and Modernity," *Olympika 7* (1998), 31).
- 42 Gerlach, "The Mormon Games," 18. Gerlach's formidable article provides a detailed description and analysis of the major issues, especially the role of the LDS church at the 2002 Olympic Winter Games. See also Ken Leiser, "Mormons Will Keep Low Profile, Won't Proselytize; Church Missionaries Are There to Help Visitors," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 6 February 2002.

- 43 Rachel Dahl, "News of the Church: Being a Good Host to Visitors During Games," *Ensign*, January 2002, 75.
- 44 Gerlach, "The Mormon Games," 2, 5.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 46 "Facts About Salt Lake City: Host City for 2002 from Bid Committee Sources," *Citius Altius Fortius* (since 1997, *Journal of Olympic History*), 3 (Autumn 1995), 34-36.
- 47 Gerlach, "The Mormon Games," 7.
- 48 Kit Poole, "News of the Church: LDS Volunteers Helping at the Olympics," *Ensign*, August 1984, 78.
- 49 *Ibid.*
- 50 Gerlach, "The Mormon Games," 32. Gerlach asserts that the LDS church indeed reaped a public relations windfall from the international press coverage of the church in conjunction the Olympics. Despite the church's low-key approach, they indeed were the "Mormon Games."
- 51 *Ibid.*, 9-10.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 10. Jon Huntsman Sr., a billionaire industrialist and one of Utah's most prominent residents, as well as a devout Mormon, decried Romney's hiring practices as "cronyism" and criticized the lack of religious diversity among Olympic organizers.
- 53 *Ibid.*, 10-11. Bateman agreed and over 3,000 BYU students assisted with the Games.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 31, for an excellent discussion of these themes.
- 55 *Ibid.*, 15-18. At a March 16, 2001 press conference, SLOC President Mitt Romney handed out glasses of orange juice and champagne as he emphatically emphasized that "These are not the Mormon Games."
- 56 *Ibid.*, 12.
- 57 Pat O'Driscoll, "Mormons Take Pride in Taking Part in Olympics; Games Will Enhance Public's Perception of Church, Leader Says," *USA Today*, 19 February 2002.
- 58 Rachel Dahl, "News of the Church: Being a Good Host to Visitors During Games," *Ensign*, January 2002, 75.
- 59 Tiffany E. Lewis, "News of the Church: Media Spotlight Shines on Church," *Ensign*, May 2002, 110.
- 60 The paradoxical themes in Mormonism are far too broad of a topic to be treated here. An excellent starting point for investigating the issue in the context of the Olympic Games is Gerlach, "The Mormon Games," and Dyreson, "Olympic Games and Historical Imagination." Dyreson's article focuses on the Mormon and Utah paradoxical portrayal of tradition and modernity in bidding for and publicizing the 2002 Olympic Winter Games. The most definitive sociological survey of Mormon culture and its paradox-

ical approach to assimilation is found in Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle With Assimilation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994). For a strong discussion of paradoxes in Mormon theology, see Margaret and Paul Toscano, *Strangers in Paradox: Explorations in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990). For a more general approach to Mormonism's cultural paradoxes, especially dealing with Mormon and non-Mormon Utah, see Thomas G. Alexander and James B. Allen, *Mormons and Gentiles: A History of Salt Lake City* (Boulder, Colorado: Pruett Publishing, 1984), 273-317; James B. Allen, "Testimony and Technology: A Phase of the Modernization of Mormonism Since 1950" in *After 150 Years: The Latter-day Saints in Sesquicentennial Perspective*, ed. Thomas G. Alexander and Jessie L. Embry (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983), 173-207; Ethan R. Yorgason, *Transformation of the Mormon Culture Region* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 130-171.